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ABSTRACT

In order to minimize the dread which students and teachers alike often feel toward freshman composition courses, it is important to involve students in reading and writing assignments which are of interest and importance to them. Autobiography, as a subject for study and a focus for writing, can be a great motivator and an expediter of the learning process in English composition. The form is easy to read and interesting for the students; at the same time, it is instructive about writing style. Writing autobiography has many of the same advantages and also instills confidence and incentive in students who may have little of either. It prompts them to consider philosophic values and historical process as well as experiment with basic patterns of writing. In the classroom, the student begins with simple patterns, such as using the narrative style to describe an event. Later when the student addresses discoveries and relationships, more complex patterns, such as illustration, definition, analysis, and comparison/contrast, are used. Other forms of exposition, and other modes of autobiography can then be explored; the genre of autobiography is an effective vehicle for expression of history, social values, aesthetic form and linguistic skills. (MB)

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN ENGLISH COMPOSITION

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN ENGLISH COMPOSITION

MARGARET BYRD BOEGEMAN

I

The freshman composition course at the community college is frequently dreaded by student and teacher alike. The students are reluctantly compelled into a class they do not want to take, and the instructors are reluctantly compelled into a class they do not want to teach. The reason for the reluctance, on both parts, is the usually high quantity of work assigned and the usually low quality of work completed. Causes are myriad, having to do with the too often repeated reasons why Johnny and Janie can't read and write, with the students' often tedious and repetitive past twelve years of training, or with the fact that the class is compulsory. Students and teachers at the community college are additionally handicapped by the problem of low morale. Community college students in overwhelming numbers have the idea that they cannot succeed in academics, particularly in writing. Regardless of whether they are fresh out of high school or returning students and mature adults, and regardless of their actual ability, this fear prevails.

Consequently the first and major task of the instructor is to provide a situation in which the students believe they can learn. These students must maintain a

modicum of confidence and self-esteem in order to learn, and while it is not our responsibility to establish these qualities in a student (not to mention the limits of our ability to do so) we can build on whatever confidence the students bring. At the very least, we must be sure that neither our material nor our methodology undermines it. We need to offer these students the kind of course which will challenge them and stimulate their interest without either intimidating them or condescending to them.

Therefore if a community college composition course is to be successful, the content (the reading and writing assignments) must be selected with this particular audience in mind. We must begin where the students are, basic as that sounds, and take them as far as they can go in the time we have. Just to keep them in class we must accomplish two things. First we must reach the students emotionally as well as intellectually and, second, we must show them sufficient and believable reasons for them to write. These students need a goal and purpose more immediate than a grade at the end of the semester (which is a poor motivator for students who believe they are going to fail anyway). They need to see that every reading and writing assignment has a direct bearing on their lives now, while they are in the class. It is only when they become comfortable and familiar with the skills

of reading and writing--and often this takes a long time--that we can expect them to stake out long-term goals such as a grade, a degree, or an education for its own sake. Thus, we are in the position of trying to give a survival tool, like a life preserver, to a group of people who simply do not believe it will help them float.

Yet by allowing them to read something of immediate interest and to write something of immediate importance to them, it is possible that within one semester such students can be reading and writing at a respectable quality and quantity for freshman composition. By carefully selecting material and structuring assignments, one can even introduce them to literary form, sharpen their skills of criticism and transmit humanistic values, all without diverting the emphasis from reading and writing. One approach to composition which fills all these criteria focuses on personal writing, or autobiography.

Teachers have long recognized the value of personal writing in "warmup" exercises: writing from experience helps break the writer's block, and by beginning with the students' "home" territory, we can build students' confidence and interest in writing. Sustaining the initial focus on personal writing throughout the semester allows students to pursue a subject that is interesting, in a mode that is at least modestly successful for them, while simultaneously developing the same writing skills

that are stressed in most traditional approaches to composition.

If students are going to be writing autobiography, then it is logical and appropriate for them to read in this genre also. I do not believe that students imitate the material they read, or even consciously learn how to write from reading other people, but I do assume that students better understand and are more comfortable with writing assignments when they have read a few examples of similar efforts.

II

Autobiography as a subject of study has several immediate and practical advantages. First, it is easy for the students to read. It is usually grounded in the particular texture of specific detail which helps to keep the attention of even reluctant readers. Also, it encourages them to use such detail in their own writing, which helps to counteract the usual breezy generalizations that sweep throughout beginning writing.

Second, there are usually some elements of narrative in autobiography, a form with which students are familiar (from film and television, if not from reading) and therefore comfortable. The fact that narrative itself contains many of the most important elements of composition--a beginning, a middle, an end, a strict sense of

progression, cause and effect, proportion, selectivity, balance and theme--works to the advantage of teacher and student. As the form of narrative is easily understood, it becomes a teaching tool whose component parts can be easily demonstrated and analyzed. Furthermore, the narrative is a flexible mode of organization and can be easily combined with most other rhetorical patterns: induction, deduction, comparison/contrast, process analysis, etc.

Third, students find "lives" more interesting than just about anything else; there is an immediate connection with and empathy for the problems of another human being. That these stories are true and not fictions only strengthens them in the students' esteem. Art is suspect, but Truth... well, truth can be trusted. And the particular kind of truth in an autobiographical statement cannot be denied--the truth of the perceptions of the writer exercised on the events of his or her life. The strong authorial voice both compels interest and tenders confidence; it is a voice students will listen to because they know <u>who</u> is speaking.

Fourth, there is inherent in the form of autobiography an implicit purpose which serves the beginning student as stimulus, even inspiration. No one writes an autobiography unless she/he thinks she/he has made a success of his or her life. The teleology of autobiography is of success through struggle, whether that

struggle be with self or with circumstance. The teleology of a composition course is (ideally) much the same. Thus, nearly every autobiographer serves the student as a model for self-development, even if the autobiographer has been the most recalcitrant of sinners, a St. Augustine, or an Eldridge Cleaver. All of the authors show, in one form or another, that the process of writing about one's life is also a process of controlling one's life. As the students follow their models, it becomes apparent that the process of controlling one's life is also a process of controlling one's language. When students wish to express with some exactitude the conditions of their existence, they become considerably more alert to the nuances of language because these affect their own verbal image.

So, the form of autobiography is easy to read and interesting for the students, while at the same time instructive about writing in some of the most important ways. One piece of evidence which suggests the success of this kind of writing is the repeated inclusion in composition texts of a small group of essays, all in the first person: Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son," Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant," Thoreau's "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience," and a few others.

The humanist benefits of reading autobiography reinforce the practical advantages. If students study

what human beings have written about themselves, this puts the human experience at the center of the educational process, where, in the tradition of humanism, it belongs. If, while we are teaching students to write, we wish also to inculcate the values of the humanities, no vehicle could be more effective than this one. As I have already pointed out, students read it with interest and empathy, and they accept (perhaps even too easily) the values of the author. The autobiographical form, then, broadens their awareness of other conditions of human existence, other values, and other goals than those they bring with them to class. Whatever the issue, whatever the degree of controversy and whatever the distance from the students' own lives, from human rights to oil rights, material explained in the first person and grounded in experiential detail will involve them more effectively and remain with them longer than any other approach to the same issues. Thus, reading autobiography transmits inherited cultural values as well as serving the practical needs of the writing class.

III

Writing autobiography offers many of the same advantages as reading autobiography. For the student it is interesting and motivating to write; for the instructor it is interesting and rewarding to read.

Putting aside this last advantage as gratuitous, we can consider the perhaps obvious benefits of students interested in investigating their lives and motivated to write about them. It is axiomatic that interested and motivated students produce better essays. Given the insecurity characteristic of this group of students, perhaps even more important, is the authority writing autobiography confers. No one else knows more about the subject than the student writer. This absolutely eliminates all plagiarism (which, I have found, is the result less of laziness than of fear of being wrong). Students cannot plagiarize their own lives and beliefs and would not trust anyone else to do so. This subject is so important that it cannot be trusted to another person's "help." Students may write about their lives effectively or not effectively, but they will not write stupidly, carelessly or fearfully. This in itself is a great boon to the teacher and a self-fulfilling success for the students, since the results will be so much better than anything else they have attempted.

Autobiographical subjects for writing also function as great equalizers for the varied backgrounds from which the students come. Whether the students are young or old, wealthy or indigent, foreign or native, learned or ignorant, all have had a past from which to fashion an autobiography. There can be no "instructor's slant" to

this assignment. No race, religion, or political view has the advantage. If the assignment works in favor of anyone, it is the older students, who have somewhat more material in their lives to choose from and who have usually managed to gain a bit of perspective on the incidents in their pasts. If the student's essays are shared, however, this advantage serves the rest of the class as well, as the younger students find the essays of classmates more satisfying writing models than the textbook essays. Watching a visible person struggle through the self-defining process, particularly one who has supposedly achieved the freedom of maturity, is immeasurably encouraging to younger students and reinforces their own efforts.

Autobiographical writing has an additional benefit for the whole class in that it provides amidst variety, a common topic for discussion. In whatever manner their essays are shared, students will be able to recognize common problems in trying to impose a form on the elusive material of a life. In my class, this sharing of essays (through duplicating them and discussing them in small groups) provides some of the most valuable critiques the students' experience. The students' interest in autobiography is intensified when the writer is a classmate. They take seriously their role as critics and they take seriously the evaluations and suggestions

offered by the other students. This further strengthens the instructor's critiques. When students hear similar evaluations from several sources, they are much more likely to accept and act on them. Discussion of their own essays (as opposed to those in a text) finds them willing to consider such formal problems as proportion, level of diction, unity, and coherence, problems which are often ill attended when the essays discussed are not their own. Suddenly the problems of selecting the right words become immediate and personal and "relevant," to bring back a word from the sixties. The attention with which they scrutinize each others' work is a model of classroom involvement. The subject of a life seems to be nearly as interesting to other students as it is to the writer.

Writing autobiography also has certain advantages in promoting humanistic values, just as reading autobiography does. First, it encourages self-reflection, an exercise very little pursued by this group of students at this time in their lives. (This fact is undeniable by anyone who teaches at the community college, in spite of what the popular press has to say about the "me" generation.) In the course of self-reflection, one of the things that students gradually come to see is that each life is a process of growth and change, an interaction between the self and its particular society. Students begin to see

a difference between the self who is writing (in the present) and the self who is being explained (in the past). They begin to sort out what they have effected in their lives and what has come about as the result of other forces--family, geography, or economic circumstances. In this sorting out of present and past, causes and effects is a budding familiarity with the historical process. That is, a pattern perceived in the present is imposed on material of the past, both of which are controlled by the mind of the writer.

As historical process is discovered to them, albeit unawares, so also may be some philosophic values. In self-reflection there is a sorting out of what is important in a life and an aligning of those important pieces into a pattern of values and principles--principles lived, not principles memorized. This is, of course, the same process that the great autobiographers of the past have undergone, and which makes their works not only interesting historical documents but timeless records of the human mind. Though these students in the community college will probably not develop in one semester the interest in or ability to read the great autobiographies of history, the fact that the students are, however clumsily, repeating the struggles for clarity and coherence contained in those books, both connects them with that past and carries those humanistic values on into the future.

As autobiographical writing begins to develop historical awareness and philosophical speculation, we have already touched on two of the three major subjects of humanities curriculum: the other, of course, is language studies. Writing autobiography requires the writer to present a self to an audience. Selecting and shaping that self is a process not only of self-analysis, but of linguistic skill. Students must study and evaluate, however informally, strategies of self-analysis and self-presentation. In historical models, (even recent ones) they can find some parallels and recognize some models. Writing autobiography and discussing this writing sharpens critical skills as well as writing skills, and brings to students a realization of their connection with and dependence on earlier writing models. This dimension of historical awareness is usually left for more advanced courses in the history of literature, but if the specialized terminology of rhetoric is omitted and if the writing models studied are simple ones, this concept of historical connection can be included without special effort at this beginning level. Writers from the time of Augustine have looked to established models in the process of shaping their own stories; it is an historical corollary of the form, and another dimension of the humanistic tradition.

So, autobiographical writing is interesting and successful for students, and it also helps them to see

themselves, their values, and the circumstances of their lives more clearly. They find that telling their stories relieves them of some confusion and some burden of affirming their presence in the class--one might call it the "Ancient Mariner" syndrome. It is a clarifying, enriching and healing act for most of these students who have a limping self-esteem. Once they have told (themselves as much as anyone) who they are, they can much more easily move on to other kinds of writing. It is a sort of fundamental establishment of themselves as writers to say on a typewritten page "This is who I am," and a sort of yeast to the brew of their continued writing.

III

Given the advantage of autobiography as a subject for study and as a focus for writing, it might now be useful to consider the applications of its forms within a class. It is possible to develop a great variety within the form of autobiography: I am going to propose one line of development which I have found successful.

Naturally, one begins with the simple patterns and works toward the more complex. The narrative is, of course, the easiest form for the student to try. As pointed out earlier, however, the narrative is by no means an unsophisticated form, for it requires the students to be coherent, unified, sequential and selective.

Moreover, narrative is not the end but only the beginning of the rhetorical forms that can be developed within autobiography; and for each form there is a corresponding mode of self-apprehension, which, if accurately read by the instructor, will suggest the stage of development of the student's mind.

For example, most students begin to write by giving a simple account of something that happened "to" them. When that something stops acting on them, whether it be a bicycle, a parent, or a wave, the "story" will end. At this stage they are aware of themselves as being acted upon but not as acting themselves. Their lives are perceived primarily as a series of events--rites of passage, celebrations, accidents--without much order, meaning, or consequence. Certainly they are not aware of themselves as controlling the direction or determining the values in their lives.

This initial and simple stage of self-apprehension can be deepened if the students are asked to write about an "accomplishment." While this assignment may still be presented as a straightforward narrative, students become aware of themselves as acting on and, to some degree, controlling their lives. More than likely the students will use a cause/effect organization in this piece of writing, showing that their efforts at practicing something produced a satisfying result or that trying

something before they were ready resulted in disaster. The "accomplishment" assignment also suggests to the students that somewhere, either at the beginning or at the end of the paper, there should be a statement about just what was accomplished. If this is included, we find that students have imposed either a deductive or inductive pattern on the narrative.

The next step encourages the students to move from an "accomplishment" to a "discovery." In this sort of progression, students begin to deal with internal achievements (such as insights, determinations, and control over emotions) as well as the external. They may use the assignment to relate the discovery, to clarify the discovery, or as a means of actually making the discovery. At this point students become aware of writing as a tool for finding out what they think, or writing as a means of thought as well as an expression of thought. That is a tremendous amount of conceptual growth in only three writing assignments--from narration of simple sequence to cause and effect connections within the framework of an inductive or deductive pattern, and from passive observations to realization of accomplishments to an exploration of the distinction between external and internal achievements. They have moved from the percepts of experience to the concepts of creative thought, and from writing as a tool which reflects their reality to writing as a tool which discovers their reality.

Remarkable as this progress is, it is only the beginning of what can be done with personal writing.

For example, if the students are asked to write about a relationship, new writing patterns will naturally develop out of this assignment. First, the students will be coaxed away from narrative to another form of organization--illustration, definition, analysis, comparison/contrast, or whatever they need to render the relationship clearly and satisfactorily. The students become aware that there is more than one person acting in this relationship; there are two or more people interacting, which complicates the pattern considerably. Further, most relationships are long term affairs, and so the students must condense several years into a few paragraphs, which is much more difficult than compressing an event of a few hours or even a few days. In the discussion of a relationship, the organization will very likely take as guideposts qualities rather than events, which requires students to explore and illustrate ideas as well as facts, i.e. to think analytically as well as describe concretely.

Other forms of exposition, and other modes of autobiography can be explored by other writing assignments. Students can explain reasons for their beliefs, attitudes or changes, in the time-honored mode of the confession. They can defend their preferences and

prejudices in the manner of the apologia, or they can defend in a different sense their vulnerable inner lives by creating roles or masks projecting the way they wish to be seen.[1] They can argue for a political, intellectual, or social position based on their own hard-wrought experience. Any and all of these writing tasks will challenge them to explore new forms of writing while still grounding their essays in material that is familiar and important to them.

Literary as well as expository possibilities exist within this form also. Each year, a few of my students chose to experiment with it. Usually, without my direction or any written models from their readings, one or two students will turn in an exploration of an interior state of mind, much in the manner of a story by Virginia Woolf, and written for the sake of the exploration rather than for the sake of any discovery or change that comes out of it. (This is a somewhat more sophisticated stage of the third assignment I discussed, on "discoveries.") While I do not assign such experiments as these in a freshman composition course (they might be more appropriate for creative writing) they nonetheless regularly if infrequently turn up, suggesting that some students are psychologically ready for and interested in a more complex type of writing than the standard autobiographical forms. Recognizing this, an instructor

can easily offer such students more challenging assignments for the duration of the course. Such experiments are worth sharing with the rest of the class, for this kind of writing done by a classmate impresses the students much more than if it had been done by Virginia Woolf or James Joyce, and greatly expands their ideas about what writing is and of what they as writers can do. Even if they will not be required to read or write in this style as dental technicians or engineers, it makes them aware of dimensions in language they have never before considered.

IV

Any of these experiments in autobiographical writing are valuable exercises for indicating to the instructor the state of the student's mental development, as well as for encouraging the student's own skill, confidence and clarity of vision. Once students can assign order, meaning, and direction to even a small segment of their lives, they have enough control to explore, progress, and accomplish in other types of writing. Moreover, they become eager to write, for they have discovered that they have something of their own to say, a reason for saying it and an audience for whom to say it well.

Therefore, after students have demonstrated an ease and an ability to write in the autobiographical mode,

the instructor wishes to encourage them to write in other forms as a complement and counterbalance to the personal writing, one would wish to make this transition without losing the authority, directness, and immediacy personal writing has offered. I will suggest three ways I have found to do this without sacrificing the continuity of the class or the quality of the students' writing.

The first way constructs a bridge between their lives and the material they have ready. I ask the students to connect anything in their lives with any of the autobiographical essays in the text. This assignment requires them to draw parallels between their lives and the life of a person they know only through print, by recognizing a similarity of circumstance, of character, of attitude, etc. It is a major step toward an intellectual connection with the world of history, literature and ideas conveyed through the written word. The discoveries the students make are often startling and always original, gratifying to the teacher and the student as the beginnings of analytic thought. In this writing assignment, since it is partially based on "objective" material, one can enter into an evaluation of the logic as well as the style of the writing. The form of the writing, though it develops naturally out of the parallels recognized, will usually emerge as a comparison/contrast format, which

the students may not yet have tried. Thus, there will be certain formal elements, of both content and organization, which will unify all the writing attempts and provide the basis for discussion at a more challenging intellectual level than the previous assignments.

A second successful approach to expository writing that is still grounded in the personal and immediate allows the students to analyze another member of the class in order to help improve his or her writing. In a one-to-one situation, where both students know each other, the writer recognizes a clear purpose and audience for this assignment and is still able to speak in the first person with the authority bestowed by familiarity with the other person's writing. If the class has been sharing essays all along (which, as I have mentioned above, has numerous benefits), then the assignment to critique the writing of a fellow student is only a natural extension of group discussions. These discussions will have built the writer's confidence in his or her powers of analysis. Because of this prior experience at critiquing, the writer brings to this assignment the same authority which she/he has been writing about his or her own life. Further, there is a clear reason and a clear consequence for the essay. By helping another student recognize features of his or her writing, the function of the analysis is made immediate and concrete.

The "reality" of this writing assignment is an additional motivation. The assignment is valuable not only to the writer, but also to the critic. It usually reinforces the suggestions of the instructor (which have been made privately and in writing, not verbally and to the group) and provides a more tangible and lasting piece of evaluation than the discussions have given.

Students must have had exposure to about three papers by another student to begin to recognize stylistic features of that writing. But if these papers have been discussed separately in class, the writer has no trouble linking them and identifying the emerging patterns. From my experience with this assignment, I can testify that it is enormously successful.

The third suggestion I have for sustaining the interest and power of personal writing, while moving into "objective" subjects, is to give the students a long piece of autobiographical writing, preferably a complete book, and ask them to write on this subject. By entering into what is in effect another one-to-one relationship (though this time with a person they can know only through his or her writing), students are able to sustain the same interest in a life and the same connection with the person about whom they are writing as they were with the assignment just discussed.

The types of writing assignments which can grow out

of this reading are unlimited--from simple (or not so simple) summaries of the autobiography, to analysis of the author or the style, to research on the person and/or book. What is more important than the particular kinds of writing attempted (which will in any case be governed by the type of author and material in the book) is to give the students enough of the writing of a single person so that they can become familiar with its form, style, and point of view. As with essays evaluating the writing of other students, the student writer must have a certain quantity of words before she/he can begin to see the patterns, and a single essay is not enough.

The reading and thoughtful consideration of a complete autobiography by each student may be supplemented by reading and discussion of one or more autobiographies by the whole class. This leads naturally to a consideration of generic forms or, in simpler words, to thinking about what makes a good autobiography. By the time students have written parts of their own autobiographies, read segments of autobiographies from perhaps twenty persons, plus one or more full length books, they have a firm understanding of what makes an autobiography good. When I ask them to rate the autobiographies they have read according to some principles of excellence, they come up with many of the same qualities that the leading critics of autobiography have listed: a sense of the

essence of the person, a sense of completeness to the life, a sincerity and openness in tone, a structural principle, a clear sense of audience, a vivid prose style. Most of these qualities every writing teacher tries to instill in her students. These students come to recognize and to "own" these critical principles, through using them, not just through hearing about them.

It is a long road to this point when the class as a whole can discuss an abstract concept such as form, but it is not, let me stress, a tedious one. It is marked by a sense of accomplishment and the developing awareness of their potential at every step of the way. The essays are consistently interesting and more carefully thought out than even the most provocative list of teacher-invented assignments could possibly stimulate. There is a sense of personal growth, a sifting of values as well as a honing of writing skills. Humane values are transmitted both through the readings and the writings with an immediacy not quickly laid aside. Applying their developing skills and perceptions to situations that are right in front of them and helping another student write a better essay brings a refreshed--or perhaps newborn--belief in the power and efficacy of language, particularly their own language.

In short, autobiography is a great motivator and an expediter of the learning process in English composition.

It instills confidence and incentive in students who have little of either. It prompts them to consider philosophic values and historical process as well as experiment with basic patterns of writing. If the students use these intellectual paradigms largely unaware of their significance, the exercises will nonetheless prepare them for later encounters with the history of thought. The genre of autobiography is an effective vehicle for expression of history, social values, aesthetic form, and linguistic skills all because it seems simply to be a story of one person's life. It does not preach so much as simply converse; it does not come attached with a label of high culture, but rather with a label of truth, which the students feel they can trust. Autobiography is one means of integrating the students' education with their lives and of allowing a skills class to become a humanities class, in a humane way.

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LOS ANGELES

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NOTES

1 The creation of a mask is a legitimate if unusual autobiographical activity, as evidenced by writers such as Gibbon, who screen and protect their inner selves this way. A person needs considerable skill to write a convincing mask, and often those students who attempt this form are among the better writers as well as the more sophisticated thinkers in the class. They are aware of the distinction between the self or selves inside the writer, and the selective projection of the self on the page. When they choose to defend their privacy by projecting a deliberately chosen role, they will often embellish this role with humor and vivid description, deflecting with entertainment the curiosity of their peers. This strategy is effective for the class as well as the individual, for it demonstrates to the class the art involved in self-depiction, and the importance of tone, perspective, detail, and authorial control in a way that the simpler, "sincere" autobiographical essays do not. The class is usually quick to detect a role as role and can discuss the writing formally while respecting the privacy of the author.